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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000183

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AF/S FOR BNEULING  
NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE

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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S GROUP PLANS FURTHER DEMOCRATIC ACTIVISM

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

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Summary  
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11. (C) Jenny Williams, National Coordinator of the Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), told the Ambassador February 1 that her organization had succeeded in creating political space for itself and its agenda of democratic change in Zimbabwe. WOZA,s challenge now was to maintain that space while dramatically increasing the number of women participating in their marches and demonstrations. She noted that WOZA,s relations with other parts of the democratic opposition in Zimbabwe were strained by sexism and elitism on their part. Separately, the Ambassador visited a U.S.-backed Amani Trust Center for Victims of Torture facility, where he met a number of WOZA activists who had recently been beaten and repeated his assurance to Williams of continued U.S. financial and moral support. End Summary.

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&Come Forward8  
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14. (C) Williams said the goal of WOZA, which means &come forward8 in Shona, was to force President Mugabe to relinquish power. She was not a politician and WOZA was not a political party with any interest in power, nor did the organization back a specific political party. Rather, WOZA was composed of concerned Zimbabwean women, most of them poor and older, who felt that without democratic change the country would no longer be a fit place to raise families. The organization,s slogan for its upcoming Valentine,s Day protest was &the power of love would overcome the love of power.8 It was a message that she felt would resonate with most Zimbabweans, who were deeply unhappy with political corruption.

15. (C) Williams noted she had been personally arrested 16 times but had only one court case pending, and that was for participating in a demonstration against the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) last July that had been organized by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the main opposition political party. In her view, this was evidence of increasing official tolerance, itself the result of the political space that WOZA had won through its willingness to take its cause to the streets and by its firm commitment to non-violence. In many instances, local police now defended WOZA activists from more aggressive security forces, often telling her and her colleagues privately that they approved of WOZA,s actions. She noted that WOZA had done much of its best work while in jail, talking directly to police officers about the need for political change in the country.

16. (C) Williams said most Zimbabwean police were reluctant to beat a woman, especially an older woman. The organization had used that to its advantage. However, there were exceptions, such as a recent demonstration in suburban Harare that had resulted in numerous arrests, with many of those arrested having been subsequently beaten while in custody (see para ten below). WOZA,s biggest challenge remained overcoming many Zimbabwean women,s fear of the police, which was especially pronounced among the more passive ethnic Shona. This was the main obstacle to WOZA rallies moving from hundreds of participants to thousands. WOZA attempted to overcome this obstacle by confronting head-on the tendency toward conformity and by encouraging Zimbabwe,s women to speak out and get involved.

17. (C) Williams said that aiding WOZA,s efforts to encourage activism was the increasing degree of desperation on the part of average Zimbabweans. People were in despair over the dramatic fall in living standards, over the failing health system, over the lack of jobs, and over the decline in educational standards. Women were motivated to activism by bread and butter issues not by the mainstream opposition,s calls for human and constitutional rights. The Ambassador said we increasingly believed this was the right focus for

the opposition in Zimbabwe and promised continued support, financial and moral.

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Relations with MDC; Other Organizations  
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18. (C) Williams said WOZA and the MDC had a complicated and not always constructive relationship. To an extent they shared the same goal and she wished them well. However, the MDC saw everything through the prism of its drive to gain power and felt that WOZA should take fall into line behind them and follow directions from the MDC. On many occasions, the MDC had actually worked to undermine WOZA demonstrations. An added problem was widespread male chauvinism in Zimbabwe, including within the MDC, which made it difficult for them to work with a woman's organization as an equal. In that vein, Williams noted the importance of the Secretary as a symbol to women throughout the world, and especially in Africa, that sexism had no place in a democratic society.

19. (C) Williams said that in addition to sexism, the other factor that inhibited her organization's cooperation with other elements of the democratic opposition was class. WOZA's members were by-and-large drawn from the ranks of the poor, while civil society groups such as the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) were primarily composed of educated urban elites whose ideas of mass-action were to hand out leaflets. She noted the church had a similar problem. WOZA had hoped to spark action within the church hierarchy by creating pressure from below, but church leaders saw themselves as part of the elite and dismissed calls for action from below.

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Victims of Torture Visit  
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10. (C) Later the same day, the Ambassador paid a long-scheduled visit with Amani Trust (an NGO which, with U.S. victims of torture funds, works with Zimbabwean victims) to a group of local women who had suffered abuse at the hands of security forces. As it turned out, this was the group of WOZA activists Williams had described, who had been beaten while in custody following the January demonstration in suburban Harare.

11. (C) The women were all motivated, as Williams had asserted, by bread and butter issues such as school fees for their children. They told their tales in simple, firm, and moving terms. All had been beaten while in custody and several were still lame as a result. If the aim of the security forces had been to cow the women into giving up their activism with WOZA, they failed. The oldest of the group said quite simply, &They've taken everything from me over 25 years. They can beat my woman's body if they want. I don't care anymore. I won't back down.8 At the same time, these simple, poor women displayed a solid understanding of both the politics and the economics of the regime's land reform policies. Asked about access to land, one outspoken woman said &what would I do with a commercial farm when I can't even afford seed or fertilizer for my garden plot.8

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Comment  
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12. (C) In a February 2 conversation with Morgan Tsvangirai, he referred to Jenny Williams as a &rabble-rouser8 (septel). She's certainly that, but she is also a deeply courageous person, as are her colleagues, and she has clearly found a message and a method that is successfully motivating grass roots support. As outsiders, it seems to us that WOZA is more in touch with the political sentiments of ordinary Zimbabweans than much of the political and civic leadership. In the current political climate in Zimbabwe, this is more likely than esoteric appeals for human and constitutional rights to get Zimbabweans into the streets in opposition to the Mugabe regime. When the Ambassador recounted the President's inaugural message to the group of abused women, they unanimously replied that it was very encouraging to them to know that someone was listening to them and supporting their cause even if we could not provide them all the material support they needed in their struggle.

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